

Reflexive impotence, immobilization and liberal communism

By contrast with their forebears in the 1960s and 1970s, British students today appear to be politically disengaged. While French students can still be found on the streets protesting against neoliberalism, British students, whose situation is incomparably worse, seem resigned to their fate. But this, I want to argue, is a matter not of apathy, nor of cynicism, but of *reflexive impotence*. They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it. But that 'knowledge', that reflexivity, is not a passive observation of an already existing state of affairs. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Reflexive impotence amounts to an unstated worldview amongst the British young, and it has its correlate in widespread pathologies. Many of the teenagers I worked with had mental health problems or learning difficulties. Depression is endemic. It is the condition most dealt with by the National Health Service, and is afflicting people at increasingly younger ages. The number of students who have some variant of dyslexia is astonishing. It is not an exaggeration to say that being a teenager in late capitalist Britain is now close to being reclassified as a sickness. This pathologization already forecloses any possibility of politicization. By privatizing these problems – treating them as if they were caused only by chemical imbalances in the individual's neurology and/or by their family background – any question of social systemic causation is ruled out.

Many of the teenage students I encountered seemed to be in a state of what I would call depressive hedonia. Depression is usually characterized as a state of anhedonia, but the condition

I'm referring to is constituted not by an inability to get pleasure so much as it by an inability to do anything else *except* pursue pleasure. There is a sense that 'something is missing' – but no appreciation that this mysterious, missing enjoyment can only be accessed *beyond* the pleasure principle. In large part this is a consequence of students' ambiguous structural position, stranded between their old role as subjects of disciplinary institutions and their new status as consumers of services. In his crucial essay 'Postscript on Societies of Control', Deleuze distinguishes between the disciplinary societies described by Foucault, which were organized around the enclosed spaces of the factory, the school and the prison, and the new control societies, in which all institutions are embedded in a dispersed corporation.

Deleuze is right to argue that Kafka is the prophet of distributed, cybernetic power that is typical of Control societies. In *The Trial*, Kafka importantly distinguishes between two types of acquittal available to the accused. Definite acquittal is no longer possible, if it ever was ('we have only legendary accounts of ancient cases [which] provide instances of acquittal'). The two remaining options, then, are (1) 'Ostensible acquittal', in which the accused is to all and intents and purposes acquitted, but may later, at some unspecified time, face the charges in full, or (2) 'Indefinite postponement', in which the accused engages in (what they hope is an infinitely) protracted process of legal wrangling, so that the dreaded ultimate judgment is unlikely to be forthcoming. Deleuze observes that the Control societies delineated by Kafka himself, but also by Foucault and Burroughs, operate using indefinite postponement: Education as a lifelong process... Training that persists for as long as your working life continues... Work you take home with you... Working from home, homing from work. A consequence of this 'indefinite' mode of power is that external surveillance is succeeded by internal policing. Control only works if you are complicit with it. Hence the Burroughs figure of the 'Control Addict': the one who is addicted

to control, but also, inevitably, the one who has been taken over, possessed by Control.

Walk into almost any class at the college where I taught and you will immediately appreciate that you are in a post-disciplinary framework. Foucault painstakingly enumerated the way in which discipline was installed through the imposition of rigid body postures. During lessons at our college, however, students will be found slumped on desk, talking almost constantly, snacking incessantly (or even, on occasions, eating full meals). The old disciplinary segmentation of time is breaking down. The carceral regime of discipline is being eroded by the technologies of control, with their systems of perpetual consumption and continuous development.

The system by which the college is funded means that it literally cannot afford to exclude students, even if it wanted to. Resources are allocated to colleges on the basis of how successfully they meet targets on achievement (exam results), attendance and retention of students. This combination of market imperatives with bureaucratically-defined 'targets' is typical of the 'market Stalinist' initiatives which now regulate public services. The lack of an effective disciplinary system has not, to say the least, been compensated for by an increase in student self-motivation. Students are aware that if they don't attend for weeks on end, and/or if they don't produce any work, they will not face any meaningful sanction. They typically respond to this freedom not by pursuing projects but by falling into hedonic (or anhedonic) lassitude: the soft narcosis, the comfort food oblivion of Playstation, all-night TV and marijuana.

Ask students to read for more than a couple of sentences and many – and these are A-level students mind you – will protest that they *can't do it*. The most frequent complaint teachers hear is that *it's boring*. It is not so much the content of the written material that is at issue here; it is the act of reading itself that is deemed to be 'boring'. What we are facing here is not just time-

honored teenage torpor, but the mismatch between a post-literate 'New Flesh' that is 'too wired to concentrate' and the confining, concentrational logics of decaying disciplinary systems. To be bored simply means to be removed from the communicative sensation-stimulus matrix of texting, YouTube and fast food; to be denied, for a moment, the constant flow of sugary gratification on demand. Some students want Nietzsche in the same way that they want a hamburger; they fail to grasp – and the logic of the consumer system encourages this misapprehension – that the indigestibility, the difficulty *is* Nietzsche.

An illustration: I challenged one student about why he always wore headphones in class. He replied that it didn't matter, because he wasn't actually playing any music. In another lesson, he was playing music at very low volume through the headphones, without wearing them. When I asked him to switch it off, he replied that even he couldn't hear it. Why wear the headphones without playing music or play music without wearing the headphones? Because the presence of the phones on the ears or the knowledge that the music is playing (even if he couldn't hear it) was a reassurance that the matrix was *still there*, within reach. Besides, in a classic example of interpassivity, if the music was still playing, even if he couldn't hear it, then the player could still enjoy it on his behalf. The use of headphones is significant here – pop is experienced not as something which could have impacts upon public space, but as a retreat into private 'OedIpod' consumer bliss, a walling up against the social.

The consequence of being hooked into the entertainment matrix is twitchy, agitated interpassivity, an inability to concentrate or focus. Students' incapacity to connect current lack of focus with future failure, their inability to synthesize time into any coherent narrative, is symptomatic of more than mere demotivation. It is, in fact, eerily reminiscent of Jameson's analysis in 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society'. Jameson observed there that Lacan's theory of schizophrenia offered a

'suggestive aesthetic model' for understanding the fragmenting of subjectivity in the face of the emerging entertainment-industrial complex. 'With the breakdown of the signifying chain', Jameson summarized, 'the Lacanian schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time'. Jameson was writing in the late 1980s – i.e. the period in which most of my students were born. What we in the classroom are now facing is a generation born into that ahistorical, anti-mnemonic blip culture – a generation, that is to say, for whom time has always come ready-cut into digital micro-slices.

If the figure of discipline was the worker-prisoner, the figure of control is the debtor-addict. Cyberspatial capital operates by addicting its users; William Gibson recognized that in *Neuromancer* when he had Case and the other cyberspace cowboys feeling insects-under-the-skin strung out when they unplugged from the matrix (Case's amphetamine habit is plainly the substitute for an addiction to a far more abstract speed). If, then, something like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is a pathology, it is a pathology of late capitalism – a consequence of being wired into the entertainment-control circuits of hypermediated consumer culture. Similarly, what is called dyslexia may in many cases amount to a *post-lexia*. Teenagers process capital's image-dense data very effectively without any need to read – slogan-recognition is sufficient to navigate the net-mobile-magazine informational plane. 'Writing has never been capitalism's thing. Capitalism is profoundly illiterate', Deleuze and Guattari argued in *Anti-Oedipus*. 'Electric language does not go by way of the voice or writing: data processing does without them both'. Hence the reason that many successful business people are dyslexic (but is their post-lexical efficiency a cause or effect of their success?)

Teachers are now put under intolerable pressure to mediate between the post-literate subjectivity of the late capitalist

consumer and the demands of the disciplinary regime (to pass examinations etc). This is one way in which education, far from being in some ivory tower safely inured from the 'real world', is the engine room of the reproduction of social reality, directly confronting the inconsistencies of the capitalist social field. Teachers are caught between being facilitator-entertainers and disciplinarian-authoritarians. Teachers want to help students to pass the exams; they want us to be authority figures who tell them what to do. Teachers being interpellated by students as authority figures exacerbates the 'boredom' problem, since isn't anything that comes from the place of authority a priori boring? Ironically, the role of disciplinarian is demanded of educators more than ever at precisely the time when disciplinary structures are breaking down in institutions. With families buckling under the pressure of a capitalism which requires both parents to work, teachers are now increasingly required to act as surrogate parents, instilling the most basic behavioral protocols in students and providing pastoral and emotional support for teenagers who are in some cases only minimally socialized.

It is worth stressing that none of the students I taught had any legal obligation to be at college. They could leave if they wanted to. But the lack of any meaningful employment opportunities, together with cynical encouragement from government means that college seems to be the easier, safer option. Deleuze says that Control societies are based on debt rather than enclosure; but there is a way in which the current education system both indebts *and* encloses students. Pay for your own exploitation, the logic insists – get into debt so you can get the same McJob you could have walked into if you'd left school at sixteen...

Jameson observed that 'the breakdown of temporality suddenly releases [the] present of time from all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis'. But nostalgia for the context in which the old types of praxis operated is plainly useless. That is why French students don't in

the end constitute an alternative to British reflexive impotence. That the neoliberal *Economist* would deride French opposition to capitalism is hardly surprising, yet its mockery of French 'immobilization' had a point. 'Certainly the students who kicked off the latest protests seemed to think they were re-enacting the events of May 1968 their parents sprang on Charles de Gaulle', it wrote in its lead article of March 30, 2006.

They have borrowed its slogans ('Beneath the cobblestones, the beach!') and hijacked its symbols (the Sorbonne university). In this sense, the revolt appears to be the natural sequel to [2005]'s suburban riots, which prompted the government to impose a state of emergency. Then it was the jobless, ethnic underclass that rebelled against a system that excluded them. Yet the striking feature of the latest protest movement is that this time the rebellious forces are on the side of conservatism. Unlike the rioting youths in the *banlieues*, the objective of the students and public-sector trade unions is to prevent change, and to keep France the way it is.

It's striking how the practice of many of the immobilizers is a kind of inversion of that of another group who also count themselves heirs of 68: the so called 'liberal communists' such as George Soros and Bill Gates who combine rapacious pursuit of profit with the rhetoric of ecological concern and social responsibility. Alongside their social concern, liberal communists believe that work practices should be (post) modernized, in line with the concept of 'being smart'. As Žižek explains,

Being smart means being dynamic and nomadic, and against centralized bureaucracy; believing in dialogue and co-operation as against central authority; in flexibility as against routine; culture and knowledge as against industrial production; in spontaneous interaction and autopoiesis as

against fixed hierarchy.

Taken together, the immobilizers, with their implicit concession that capitalism can only be resisted, never overcome, and the liberal communists, who maintain that the amoral excesses of capitalism must be offset by charity, give a sense of the way in which capitalist realism circumscribes current political possibilities. Whereas the immobilizers retain the form of 68-style protest but in the name of resistance to change, liberal communists energetically embrace newness. Žižek is right to argue that, far from constituting any kind of progressive corrective to official capitalist ideology, liberal communism constitutes the dominant ideology of capitalism now. 'Flexibility', 'nomadism' and 'spontaneity' are the very hallmarks of management in a post-Fordist, Control society. But the problem is that any opposition to flexibility and decentralization risks being self-defeating, since calls for inflexibility and centralization are, to say the least, not likely to be very galvanizing.

In any case, resistance to the 'new' is not a cause that the left can or should rally around. Capital thought very carefully about how to break labor; yet there has still not yet been enough thought about what tactics will work against capital in conditions of post-Fordism, and what *new language* can be innovated to deal with those conditions. It is important to contest capitalism's appropriation of 'the new', but to reclaim the 'new' can't be a matter of adapting to the conditions in which we find ourselves – we've done that rather too well, and 'successful adaptation' is the strategy of managerialism par excellence.

The persistent association of neoliberalism with the term 'Restoration', favored by both Badiou and David Harvey, is an important corrective to the association of capital with novelty. For Harvey and Badiou, neoliberal politics are not about the new, but a *return* of class power and privilege. '[I]n France,' Badiou has said, "Restoration' refers to the period of the return of the King,

in 1815, after the Revolution and Napoleon. We are in such a period. Today we see liberal capitalism and its political system, parliamentarianism, as the only natural and acceptable solutions'. Harvey argues that neoliberalization is best conceived of as a '*political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites'. Harvey demonstrates that, in an era popularly described as 'post-political', class war has continued to be fought, but only by one side: the wealthy. 'After the implementation of neoliberal policies in the late 1970s,' Harvey reveals,

the share of national income of the top 1 per cent of income earners soared, to reach 15 per cent ... by the end of the century. The top 0.1 per cent of income earners in the US increased their share of the national income from 2 per cent in 1978 to over 6 per cent by 1999, while the ratio of the median compensation of workers to the salaries of CEOs increased from just over 30 to 1 in 1970 to nearly 500 to 1 by 2000. ... The US is not alone in this: the top 1 per cent of income earners in Britain have doubled their share of the national income from 6.5 per cent to 13 per cent since 1982.

As Harvey shows, neoliberals were more Leninist than the Leninists, using think-tanks as the intellectual vanguard to create the ideological climate in which capitalist realism could flourish.

The immobilization model – which amounts to a demand to retain the Fordist/disciplinary regime – could not work in Britain or the other countries in which neoliberalism has already taken a hold. Fordism has definitively collapsed in Britain, and with it the sites around which the old politics were organized. At the end of the control essay, Deleuze wonders what new forms an anti-control politics might take:

One of the most important questions will concern the

ineptitude of the unions: tied to the whole of their history of struggle against the disciplines or within the spaces of enclosure, will they be able to adapt themselves or will they give way to new forms of resistance against the societies of control? Can we already grasp the rough outlines of the coming forms, capable of threatening the joys of marketing? Many young people strangely boast of being “motivated”; they re-request apprenticeships and permanent training. It’s up to them to discover what they’re being made to serve, just as their elders discovered, not without difficulty, the telos of the disciplines.

What must be discovered is a way out of the motivation/demotivation binary, so that disidentification from the control program registers as something other than dejected apathy. One strategy would be to shift the political terrain – to move away from the unions’ traditional focus on pay and onto forms of discontent specific to post-Fordism. Before we analyse that further, we must consider in more depth what post-Fordism actually is.